

## **SYNOD INTERIM STAGE**

### Region VI Synthesis Report

#### *Introduction*

In Region VI, dioceses took two approaches to the Synod Interim Stage listening sessions. One approach was to reach underrepresented groups in the first phase of the Synod. These groups include college / university students, Hispanic / Latino Catholics, women religious, and the Latin Mass community, as well as representatives from Catholic healthcare organizations and diocesan Catholic schools. The second approach was to gather diocesan and parish leaders. One diocese conducted separate listening sessions for both pastoral leaders and the laity.

During the listening sessions, most groups reflected on some adaptation of the questions provided by the USCCB Synod Team:

1. Where have I seen or experienced successes / distresses within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage the mission?
2. How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

One diocese organized the conversations around previously identified topics instead of the proposed questions. The following is a summary of the common themes identified in the diocesan reports.

#### *Communion*

There were many positive, hopeful responses to the synodal approach and experience. The synodal process “grounds us in our efforts to be a synodal Church - always listening and ever mindful of the movement of the Holy Spirit among the People of God.” It is strongly encouraged that this synodal approach be implemented on the diocesan and parish levels. “There must be a more intentional process of prayer and discernment... before decisions are made.”<sup>1</sup> In parishes, “pastoral councils should be re-developed and re-formed in this way of being Church.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, there remains some confusion regarding synodality, with a tendency among a few to equate synodality with democracy.

Adopting a synodal model is not easy. It will require time, openness, and conversion of hearts. It will also require trust among the People of God, as some believe that no structures will compel bishops and priests to receive input from those they serve and act upon it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Diocese of Detroit

<sup>2</sup> Diocese of Grand Rapids

There is overwhelming consensus that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is a necessary spiritual foundation for worship, and that the Mass, the Eucharist, and the sacraments are central to our faith as a worshipping Catholic people. The Church's mission flows to and from the Eucharistic table. Many expressed gratitude for the availability of these forms of liturgical worship, especially increased opportunities for Eucharistic adoration, fostered by the National Eucharistic Revival. Devotion to the saints and Mary (esp. the Rosary), was affirmed. The OCIA was praised as effective catechesis. Bible studies and small faith-sharing groups were seen as important in understanding and supporting faith. Some desired expanded locations and times for adoration, and more access to confessions. Some desired a lifting of restrictions on the Traditional Latin Mass and more 'traditional' forms of worship, while others wanted more "joyful" liturgical celebrations. A decline of reverence at church services was observed. There was also general concern for the decline in church attendance, especially after Covid, and among the young, but some college-age respondents observed: "The next generation of Catholics are on fire with faith"<sup>3</sup> with the increase of various outreaches to teens and on college campuses. There was a call for more or better teaching on the Mass and sacraments since the consensus is that some people leave the Church because they lack formation.

The parish community is a powerful force of engagement when we nurture, welcome and activate the faithful, even with its challenges. "A greeter at the door, recognizing people who are new, community / social events after Mass, knowing people's names [are] ways to be more welcoming... inclusion of youth and young adults, low income and poor, people with disabilities and the divorced...those struggling with sexual identity... Parishioners continue to be confused on how to address those on the margins and are desperately asking for pastoral strategies."<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis was both praised for reaching out to other Christians, unbelievers, and those on the margins, but "Fiducia Supplicans" (Dec. 18, 2023) has caused some confusion. On one hand, "To live as a 'community of love and mercy in Christ' is to act in charity that includes fraternal correction for sins that, to the modern secular eye, are merely lifestyle choices. If we are unwilling to affirm the Magisterium and resist the secularization of the faithful...then what is the point?"<sup>5</sup> On the other, "Many young Catholics exhibit a remarkable ability to live with diversity in values and lifestyles. They are compassionate and willing to accept those who are different and cannot understand the action, language and attitude of the official Church they judge to be exclusive or condemnatory. There is ample evidence that the Church has a credibility problem with many, particularly in the area of gender equality and sexuality."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Diocese of Toledo

<sup>4</sup> Diocese of Saginaw

<sup>5</sup> Diocese of Grand Rapids

<sup>6</sup> Diocese of Youngstown

Several dioceses held listening sessions with Hispanic / Latino Catholics. Some praised the efforts of bishops to provide Spanish-speaking priests and other ministers, and for their personal involvement with the Hispanic community, while acknowledging the need for more priests and resources. The challenge of creating community in parishes with both English-speaking and Hispanic / Latino Catholic populations was acknowledged, with efforts to overcome these barriers, to “promote interculturality so that there is more unity between cultures that share the same church.”<sup>7</sup> “Effective Hispanic / Latino ministry requires culturally sensitive pastoral care, language accessibility... intentional efforts to foster inclusivity... welcoming pastors who understand and minister to the Hispanic community, as well as increased formation and outreach initiatives tailored to meet the specific needs of Hispanic parishioners... [they] desire to be part of evangelization efforts of the diocese and appreciate events which can help them learn how best to do this.”<sup>8</sup>

In summary, many reports stressed that Catholics must work at being more accepting and less judgmental with regard to diverse spiritualities, liturgical preferences, and of others’ struggles. “We should not be embarrassed about recognizing that our Church might be a little messy - it’s better not to pretend that we are the perfect institution, but that we belong to the perfect and one, true faith... As communities of faith, parishes should always be in prayer together, to grow through the Holy Spirit and be able to welcome and accept one another as we are.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Participation*

An important element of being a synodal Church in mission is establishing efficient structures that facilitate subsidiarity. A common frustration was the feeling of disconnect between the diocesan offices, parishes and the wider Church. In some instances, described as a lack of transparency, poor communication, or inconsistency, which makes it difficult to walk together as one Church. Understandably, some of the distresses relate to financial issues, such as complex processes of approval for parish projects, as well as situations that result in parish closures and mergers and their impact on the parish communities. When developing Church structures, policies and procedures, it was recommended that leaders are mindful of 1) the voices that are missing, 2) the impact of transitions in leadership and 3) urban and suburban partnerships.

Overall, structures of participation are most effective when “the parishes see the diocese as a working resource, [and] pastors... are committed to a prosperity mentality dedicated to collaboration and mutual trust.”<sup>10</sup> In the diocesan reports, two dioceses in the region described a deanery model expanded to include a role for the laity. The Archdiocese of Detroit has

---

<sup>7</sup> Diocese of Kalamazoo

<sup>8</sup> Diocese of Columbus

<sup>9</sup> Diocese of Columbus

<sup>10</sup> Diocese of Columbus

established a “Families of Parishes” model that allows them to develop a missionary strategic plan and work smarter across the family by facilitating collaboration and communication; and ensuring that the financial resources of each parish are better utilized to support missionary efforts. Teams and staff can be creative in implementing the vision, focusing on action items. This fosters innovation and adaptability within the Church's structures. As a result, the “increased consistency in messaging from organizations such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) provides clarity and direction, aligning efforts across various levels of the Church hierarchy. Communication within the diocese is characterized by positivity and helpfulness, facilitating transparency, understanding, and unity among its members.”<sup>11</sup> The Diocese of Cleveland has also included the laity's participation within the re-formed deanery structure and is in its initial stages of implementation.

As pastors and leaders of the parish communities, priests play a significant role in supporting the engagement and participation of the faithful. These priests are described as passionate about their faith, relatable, collaborative and team players. There was an expressed need to take better care of our priests by providing more administrative support, a sense of community with brother priests, relationships beyond the parish, and ongoing formation. They are also in a position of power, which can cause hurt and thereby hinder the mission of the Church, by not being welcoming, by lacking transparency, by the way they address or avoid speaking out about moral issues, and by not leading in a way that fosters co-responsibility.

The leadership of women is recognized and valued. “Women have played an indispensable role in the overall ministry of the Church.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, there is a call for an expanded role for women in the Church, many of whom feel excluded in decision-making. Strong opinions were voiced on both sides of the role of women in the diaconate and priesthood.

A less common, but noteworthy, topic of discussion was vocations. We need to acknowledge the wide variety of vocations that exist among the laity and empower the faithful to use their gifts in service of the Church's mission. For example, the low numbers of religious sisters in ministry makes it more difficult to learn about consecrated life. “I know there is a lack at the top – somebody taking care of women who are interested in religious life. We have a handful of guys discerning the priesthood – women don't know that religious life is an option to them. Young women should have the model to experience it the same way as men experience it. We are expecting the sisters to recruit new sisters without having a role and presence in each parish.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Mission*

---

<sup>11</sup> Archdiocese of Detroit

<sup>12</sup> Diocese of Youngstown

<sup>13</sup> Diocese of Grand Rapids

A strong call to reawakening our missionary identity through building our universal call to holiness, living an authentically Catholic life, and emphasizing personal encounters with Jesus were expressed. A repeated message was heard that mission starts by passing on our faith in the family, but to have a strong domestic church, we need to build up men and women as individuals, while also focusing on supporting them as couples through strong marriages. Unfortunately, we have “lost a generation” of Catholics resulting in the need to reach their children in non-traditional ways.<sup>14</sup> Many of these children who are now college students have expressed that they are now evangelizing their parents.

Other comments focused on the need to live a life consistent with the gospel message and church teaching as an essential step in opening conversation about the faith. Unity across the local and universal Church is important as discord in the Church community keeps people away.

The faithful realize our priests cannot do it all and co-responsibility of the mission with the laity, especially women and the youth, is essential to unleash new energy. “The laity needs to step up and be trusted and given authority by the pastor... [this includes] young people in positions of lay leadership – pastoral council, finance council, to bring in a new perspective.”<sup>15</sup>

For the laity to be successful, specific formation is needed in the areas of the basic gospel message (kerygma), basics in Catholicism, apologetics, scripture, and the Mass. All these topics are in addition to relational skills, including welcoming, personal invitation, listening, and sharing their faith story through personal testimony or witness.

Small communities are an excellent way to empower the laity through prayer, formation, mutual encouragement, and outreach to others. “There was concern that the wide structure of the Church could make it feel impersonal. Small groups encourage the personal experience for everyone.”<sup>16</sup> These small groups and ministries must remain connected with parish communities to address the needs of the local community more effectively.

Many encouraged using the wealth of information and experiences outside the traditional parish setting for formation and encounters, including but not limited to the National Eucharistic Revival, SEEK, Steubenville Conferences, World Youth Day, retreats, social media, podcasts, YouTube, and other digital resources. One word of caution expressed was with the explosion in digital options, the need to properly vet them as inconsistencies could cause confusion and division.

---

<sup>14</sup> Diocese of Gaylord

<sup>15</sup> Diocese of Grand Rapids

<sup>16</sup> Diocese of Toledo

Finally, becoming a church of radical hospitality, to meet people where they are at, includes parish settings in which people know your name, offer unconditional acceptance, and provide opportunities for listening. “Catholics don’t know where to turn to talk about genuine issues like same-sex attraction. So, they leave and don’t come back. We need to have space for people to talk without being ridiculed.”<sup>17</sup> Disciples are desperately looking for pastoral strategies, beyond just knowing the rules and Church doctrine, so the Church can feel like family and not a place they fear.

### *Conclusion*

In our discernment as a regional team, it was apparent that there is value to the experience of synodality, the desire for synodality is strong, and the process needs to continue to be carried forward. Those who participated in the sessions appreciate that they have been listened to and their concerns, hopefully, responded to, even if there may be diversity of opinions and observations. Regardless of where people are on the ecclesiological spectrum, the opportunity to come together from different places, to listen, dialogue, and discern, has been significant because it provides a space to bring forth people’s concerns in a positive way. It is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work and a reminder that there is much that unites us, despite all the real differences that exist between us.

Another insight is that much of the feedback can be identified as both strength and weakness. For example, liturgy or faith formation. This demonstrates the important role these elements play in the experience of synodality in the local Church. It may also demonstrate the broadening in the understanding of the faithful. For example, formation 20 years ago would refer to catechesis. Today, formation also encompasses leadership, prayer, spiritual direction, etc. People are asking for more than only catechesis.

Questions for further discernment:

1. How do we bridge that gap and give people a deeper understanding, greater acceptance and humility that Christ can work through a diversity of means – whether liturgy, prayer, language, etc.?
2. With so many young people graduating with majors in catechetics / theology and a desire to serve, what can the Church do to expand upon the relatively limited positions available for careers in ministry?
3. How can seminary formation and lay leadership development be enhanced to promote a spirit of synodality and co-responsibility?
4. What more can we do to increase public awareness about the wonderful things that the Catholic Church does, especially programs that serve the poor and the vulnerable?

---

<sup>17</sup> Diocese of Grand Rapids